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FM AMEMBASSY MANILA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0745

INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS IMMEDIATE

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RHHMUNA/CDRUSPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 001201

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/19/2018

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL RP BM

SUBJECT: PHILIPPINES: CAUTIOUS REACTION TO BURMESE OPENING

REF: A. MANILA 1178

1B. MANILA 1164

1C. MANILA 1125 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: DCM Paul W. Jones, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: News that the Burmese junta may offer limited concessions to the entry of international assistance are being received with caution by the Philippine government, media, and civil society. Department of Foreign Affairs officials held out hopes that the junta's May 19 agreement to allow ASEAN to coordinate international relief efforts would allow desperately needed aid to reach storm victims soon. Before the ASEAN meeting, we pressed senior Philippine officials to push Burma to accept relief workers and aid. National media continue to excoriate the ruling junta for its seeming indifference to human suffering, and editorials underscore that ASEAN's credibility and reputation are on the line as belated disaster-relief efforts move ahead in days to come. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Pending detailed results of the May 19 ASEAN foreign ministers meeting in Singapore where Burma agreed that ASEAN would coordinate provision of international aid, it is still unclear whether the Philippine government's disaster-relief medical team will be granted visas and allowed to begin work in Burma. Principal Assistant Princess Tayo of the DFA's Asia and Pacific Affairs Office (ASPAC) explained May 15 that, notwithstanding the administration's close and continued communication with the Burmese Embassy in Manila and the Philippine Embassy in Rangoon, the DFA had not been able to get an answer from the Burmese. Tayo expressed her hope that the Singapore meeting might open new avenues of cooperation.

¶3. (C) In advance of the ASEAN ministerial in Singapore, we pressed senior Philippine officials on the need for ASEAN to push the Burmese regime to allow international relief workers and aid into Burma immediately, and not merely call for more assistance or a pledging conference. Noting President Gloria Arroyo's leading role in urging democratic change in Burma, we said that the ASEAN ministerial would be another key moment for the Philippines to take a leadership role on this issue. Philippine officials stressed that the Philippine government was deeply concerned about the situation in Burma, and very disappointed that it had been unable to send its team of medical experts there (the team was instead re-routed to assist earthquake victims in China).

¶4. (C) Director Raymond Balatbat at DFA's Office of ASEAN Affairs told us before the ASEAN meeting that the Philippines is very concerned with facilitating the entry of aid workers into Burma, but that the Burmese government had offered little cooperation. Balatbat said that the ASEAN ministerial meeting in Singapore presented an opportunity for the Philippines to help orchestrate a joint ASEAN strategy in which the organization could act as a "conduit or link" between the Burmese government and outside aid. He added that the international community "should also take advantage

of the next phase," which he predicted would be rehabilitation and reconstruction, to offer constructive engagement and win the trust of the regime.

¶15. (SBU) Philippine national media continued to lambaste the Burmese regime for allowing human suffering to continue on such a monumental scale while stonewalling life-saving aid with red tape. As publicized death tolls exceeded 133,000, a May 19 editorial cartoon in the leading-daily Philippine Star showed a grinning military junta member sitting on typhoon victims, while ASEAN struggled haplessly to assist. The accompanying editorial, "ASEAN's Embarrassment," blamed ASEAN for its passivity and naivete in believing that years of "constructive engagement" would bring about democratization. Editorials in the influential Business World observed that the people of Burma were now reaping the bitter harvest of their totalitarian government's isolationism.

KENNEY